

Introduction to Beer Judging, Tasting, and Evaluation

How do we go about tasting a beer? What do we look for in the beer? How can we rank beers in terms of quality? How do we tell a "good" beer from a "bad" beer? These are all questions addressed by the various documents and resources in the Tasting, Judging and Evaluation area on the Brewery web server.

Perception and communication are the twin skills needed by every good beer judge. Perception is the ability to see, taste, smell, and feel different elements in the beer, and to be able to recognize them for what they are and what they tell a brewer or drinker about the beer in the glass. Communication is the ability to describe these perceptions to another brewer or knowledgeable beer drinker in a meaningful way.

How to Taste Beer for the First Time...

The basic process of tasting beer can be picked up in a few minutes. Mastering it can take a lifetime. Generally:

1. Pay attention to the beer as you open it and pour it. What do you see? What do you hear?
2. Smell the beer. Many of the aromas that may flag brewing problems are subtle or fleeting, so judges smell before tasting.
3. Look at the beer. What color is it? Is it clear? Do you like the way the head looks? What size bubbles do you see? What happens when you tilt the glass? Do you see fingers of liquid clinging to the sides, or do you see thin delicate wisps from the head cling to the sides? These are some of the things that judges look at.
4. Smell the beer again. What stands out? Do you smell hops? Do you smell caramels? Do you smell fruits? What kind of fruit would you think smells like that? Have you ever smelled anything quite like this beer before? What was it?
5. Taste the beer. Swirl it around your mouth. What is the major flavor? Sweet? Bitter? Sour? All of these are possibilities, and you may taste them at different times as you move the liquid around your mouth and then swallow.
6. Take another taste. Try to narrow down the flavor you taste a bit more precisely. If you taste sweetness, what is it like? Is it like a malted milkshake? Is it like caramel candies? Is it like molasses? If you taste bitterness, what kind of bitterness do you taste? Have you experienced something like it before? Maybe something like the juniper taste of gin, or a taste that reminds you of fresh-cut pine trees, or a drier, more grassy sensation? Perhaps you taste a tartness, like lemon, or a sweet fruitiness, like apple or banana. What exactly is it that you taste??
7. Swirl the beer around in your mouth. How does it feel? Is this a light beer that you could drink from a big glass on a hot summer day? Is it a heavy beer that you'd want only a small taste of? Does it feel dry?

8. Think for a minute. Did you like this beer? What things impressed you, or what things about it would make you hesitate to drink another?
9. If you know styles, or have a style guideline handy for reference, how closely does what you just experienced match the descriptions in the style guidelines?

Perception

Good beer judges are perceptive people. They pay attention to what they experience, and they look for details that a more casual drinker might miss.

Most people do not pay attention to what they experience. They do not see, taste, smell, or feel all that is there to experience. They miss complexity and they miss subtlety.

The first step in becoming a savvy beer drinker is to learn to pay attention to what you sense, and to learn what to look for. One of the tools here that can help you with perception is the beer score sheets, which provide clues and reminders as to which elements are important, and which provide a framework for consistency and training. Another invaluable tool is the beer flavor wheel, which describes some of the common tastes and aromas possible in beer. Looking at this can open your eyes to the myriad possibilities in aroma and flavor. No longer will you be content to just say "tastes great"!

Communication

While perception is a critical skill for any beer judge, it does little good if you can not then meaningfully tell another brewer or beer consumer what it is that you like about beer. When a good beer judge tells you about a beer, you can almost taste it yourself. It's no different from reading a book by a master storyteller where events and places are described in such detail that they spring to life, becoming images in your mind. Communication is the key to effective judging.

Some of the tools here that can help you develop communication skills include the beer style guidelines. These guidelines define a framework for the language of brewers and beer judges. By understanding the guidelines, you understand the shorthand by which brewers describe their beers to savvy consumers, and the reason why brewers of mis-labeled beers can be regarded as either lacking knowledge or as deceptive hucksters, or worse.

Another valuable communication tool is the score sheet. A good judge fills out the score sheet so completely that he runs out of room, using margins for extra space. A scoresheet that's nearly empty, or that contains useless comments such as "OK" or "tastes good", are signs of an inexperienced judge.

Judging Credentials

Homebrewers who are active in judging, especially in the competition setting, should consider becoming certified through the Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP). This program, established in the mid-1980s, recognizes beer evaluation expertise as demonstrated through a combination of scores on a 3-hour standardized test of style and brewing knowledge and experience points garnered by judging in established competitions.

Any person who can pass the examination, even at the lowest levels, has a fairly high level of beer knowledge and has demonstrated a minimal level of competence in both perception and communication skills. Judges have ranks in the program, and higher-ranking judges can be assumed to have more experience, although many of the lower-ranking judges are very knowledgeable and perceptive, but have simply not yet been in the program long enough to have advanced in rank.

Tying it Together....

Judges learn what to look for in a beer, and they learn what aspects of beer are commonly associated with different types of beer, or different brewing regions of the world. They often use any of a variety of scoring methodologies as a tool to help them better communicate to others (and understand for themselves) which beers are "better" than others. There is not a single right or wrong way to score beer. As long as one system is used consistently for one purpose, and is rationally defined, the system will have some value as a communication tool. The reviews available on the net use different scales. David Brockington's reviews use a 5-star scale, made popular by noted beer author Michael Jackson. On this scale, 3 is a good score and 5 is a world-class beer that can truly be regarded as outstanding, while 1 is simply an average beer---a commodity product for the mass market. Other beer judges use a 50-point scale, such as the BJCP method. Some authors, such as James Robertson, use a 100-point scale. In any case, the scale is a tool. It reflects relationships among a group in the view of one judge: nothing more.

All of the resources available on this web page are intended to help you better learn to perceive beer qualities and communicate those qualities to other knowledgeable beer drinkers and brewers.

Some people take beer judging more seriously than others. The point is to enjoy beer and to have fun with it. Knowledge and perception can help you get more out of your beer and judging can be a lot of fun (even it does take some studying and some work).

Cheers!

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